



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Towards a political animal geography?

**Citation for published version:**

Srinivasan, K 2016, 'Towards a political animal geography?', *Political Geography*, vol. 50, pp. 76-78.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.08.002>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.08.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.08.002)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Political Geography

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

Copyright © 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



### **Towards a political animal geography?**

Eight years ago, this journal published an article (Hobson 2007) that argued for the rethinking of political geography's ambit to include nonhuman animals. In 2015, a search of the same journal - *Political Geography* - with the keyword 'animal' reveals some articles (e.g. Vaughn-Williams 2015) that refer to the intersectional character of marginalisation, but none that engages seriously with the 'question of the animal' (Wolfe 2003). Hobson's work has since been cited mainly outside the sub-discipline - but not really taken forward. Environmental issues are studied extensively in political geography, often under the rubric of political ecology. However, the concern in this scholarship continues to be the human part of the human-nature relationship. Nonhuman life-forms, animals in particular, are typically referred to in political geography as things - in terms of the 'material' - rather than as vulnerable beings whose vulnerability is often tied to their place(s) in human society.

Human geography more broadly does not share this disinterest and has addressed human-animal interactions with enthusiasm (Buller 2013; Lorimer and Srinivasan 2013). However, such scholarship remains corralled in the sub-disciplines of cultural geographies, social geographies, and geographies of science and technology, or the as yet niche 'more-than-human' geographies. Furthermore, most of this work is characterized by a curious lack of interest in the political, although there are exceptions, for instance, Buller and Morris (2003); Collard and Dempsey (2013); Rasmussen (2015). In this piece, I reflect on these two absences: the absence of the animal in political geographies, and the absence of the political in animal/more-than-human geographies.

### **THE BOUNDARIES OF POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY**

It is easy to see why political geography might be disinterested in animals. As Painter and Jeffrey (2009, 16) argue, all academic disciplines are social phenomena themselves, and as such have always been marked "by the inclusion of certain topics and points of view and the general exclusion of others." Even feminism and the women's movement were "marginal to the discourse of political

geography” until recently (Painter and Jeffrey 2009, 17). Other key concerns of our times such as disability, labour rights, and ethnicity have only lately started gaining significance in this sub-discipline.

To many commentators (Cox, Low, and Robinson 2008; Gallaher 2009), the original ties of political geography to the colonial project went along with a focus on the state and geopolitical borders - ‘big P’ politics. The poststructuralist and feminist turns led to a revisiting of sub-disciplinary boundaries. Political geography’s remit now includes ‘small p’ politics; this is politics outside of formal political spheres, often based on identities such as race, gender and sexuality, and spearheaded by individuals and non-state groups and institutions.

A common thread that runs across all kinds of political geographical scholarship is that of the relationship between space and power, and an interest in “politically engaged geographical research” (Cox, Low, and Robinson 2008, 2). This goes along with an emphasis on “radical and marginal voices” (Cox, Low, and Robinson 2008, 3) and political change in traditionally excluded domains. It is therefore surprising that the growing publically articulated concern for animal wellbeing has not made animals and their human-induced vulnerability an apropos subject-matter in political geography. I ask below whether certain substantive preoccupations in broader geographical work on animals contribute to “le silence des bêtes” (de Fontenay 1999) in political geography.

### **THE TRAJECTORIES OF ANIMAL GEOGRAPHY**

Since the publication of an edited collection by Wolch and Emel (1998), a substantial corpus of literature on animals has emerged in human geography. This literature has focused on ontological questions (such as the nature-society dualism) and descriptive and relational ethics (Buller 2015). These foci have their roots in dissatisfaction with the humanism of the social sciences and with what is seen as universalistic, abstract work in philosophy on animal ethics (Lorimer and Srinivasan 2013). Drawing on poststructuralist traditions (e.g., actor-network theory) and care ethics, animal

geography has responded by developing relational accounts of human-animal interactions. While animal geography encompasses a diverse body of work, it is possible to identify three predominant themes in this literature: agency, embodied encounters, and relational ethics.

A lot of animal geographical scholarship has the aim of foregrounding animal *agency* by theorizing the manners in which animals affect humans and social processes. This move is meant to subvert work that presents animals as 'things' that are mere background in human lives. It is also implied that taking cognizance of animal agencies enhances the ethical status of animals (Lorimer 2007).

Secondly, *embodied encounters* are valorized as the source of ethics. Direct interactions between humans and animals are taken to trigger human care and 'response-ability' (Greenhough 2010). Thirdly, the preoccupations with animal agency and embodied encounters result in conceptualisations of relational, situated ethics (Buller 2015). These accounts of relational ethics emphasise sensitivity to historical ways of life and to the practicalities of living. They stress direct encounters and pragmatic decision-making rather than macro-level decision-making. A recurrent feature is an antipathy for rules and principles, and the championing of experimental, contingent ethics.

Such arguments are usually illustrated with examples from convivial relationships (such as caring pet owners); exceptional cases in harmful relationships (e.g., caring farmers, breeders, and lab workers; 'ethical' consumers); interactions where humans are put at risk (e.g., pathogens and pests). They tend to bypass more common interactions of exploitation and harm caused by humans. They also favour ethnographic methods (Buller 2014) that attend to the details of individual, micro-scale interactions, discounting systemic and political-economic factors.

These tropes in geographical research on human-animal interactions are founded on a *conflation* of agency and moral standing. Such conflation fails to acknowledge that recognising animal agency

does not necessarily translate into care. People often are not affected by others, whether humans or animals (Ginn 2013); people even actively use their knowledge of animal agency to make exploitation more efficient (e.g., Holloway, Bear, and Wilkinson 2014).

The favouring of an ethics that is contingent on individual human willingness to be affected by and respond to animal agency ignores systemic decisions about human-animal relationships. In contemporary society, human interactions with animals are governed by factors that extend *beyond* the domain of the immediate and the particular. Decisions to change landscapes, use animals for experiments, rear cattle for food are made collectively. A cat in a laboratory might be able to influence what kind of toys and care he receives, but the decision to subject him to experiments is human and made at a systemic level. Similarly, a cat can receive starkly different treatment depending on whether she is categorized in law as a pet or an invasive animal. The emphasis on situated and pragmatic ethics thus often results in *a favouring of the status quo* because it places the onus on individuals and their encounters with animals without attending adequately to larger processes and systems that mediate these encounters.

In summary, animal geography has tended to overlook the factors and processes which impinge on the broader status quo vis-à-vis animals; it has tended to side-line the political. There are exceptions, but only a few, and these are not usually recognised as political geography (e.g., Moran 2015; Srinivasan 2013). Disciplines such as sociology (Twine 2010) and political science (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011) do not share this disinclination for animal politics. However, in human geography, animal ethics is viewed mostly as a matter for micro-scale decision making: it is largely seen as a *personal* – not *political* - matter.

## **CONCLUSION**

In examining the separation of animal and the political in geography, I have discussed two issues. One relates to the porosity of political geography's boundaries. Even with the recent broadening of

the sub-discipline's boundaries, groups and topics that don't readily match or that trouble existing conceptions of political agency and the political – for example, children's politics (Kallio and Häkli 2010) – are slow to capture the political geographical imagination. Animals constitute one such group - they confound the self-interest and contractarianism that often characterise mainstream politics. The second relates to the trajectories of animal geography which has focused on ontological concerns and championed relational, care-based ethics. The question is whether these two issues together have had the outcome that 'the question of the animal' is *not* perceived as a *political* one in human geography.

This question is crucial because, regardless of how animals and their vulnerabilities are treated by human geography, animals are, "even if unwittingly" (Mendieta 2011, paragraph 20), an integral part of our social and political systems. Examples abound, from social movements for animals and local/national/global laws to protect *and* exploit animals, to small-scale political action by children for animals (Kallio and Häkli 2010). This makes political geography's resistance to 'the question of the animal' a matter of concern even as it renders incomplete existing geographical work on animals. The separation of the political and the animal is thus a serious lacuna in both political and animal geography, and one that can be addressed only through the development of a *political* animal geography.

**Acknowledgements:** Particular thanks to James Sidaway for encouraging me to write this editorial, and to Phil Steinberg and Nick Gill for useful feedback. I will always be grateful to Vijay K Nagaraj for instilling in me a keen appreciation of the political.

## **REFERENCES**

Buller, H. 2013. 'Animal Geographies 1.' *Progress in Human Geography* Online first (March 21).

doi:10.1177/0309132513479295.

Srinivasan K., (2016) Towards a political animal geography? *Political Geography* (50) 76-78

———. 2014. 'Animal Geographies II: Methods.' *Progress in Human Geography*, 1–11.

———. 2015. 'Animal Geographies III: Ethics.' *Progress in Human Geography*, 1–9.

doi:10.1177/0309132515580489.

Buller, H, and C Morris. 2003. 'Farm Animal Welfare: A New Repertoire of Nature-Society Relations or Modernism Re-Embedded?' *Sociologia Ruralis* 43 (3): 216–37.

Collard, R, and J Dempsey. 2013. 'Life for Sale? The Politics of Lively Commodities.' *Environment and Planning A* 45 (11): 2682–99.

Cox, K R, M Low, and J Robinson. 2008. 'Introduction: Political Geography: Traditions and Turns.' In *The SAGE Handbook of Political Geography*, edited by K R Cox, M Low, and J Robinson, 17–20. London: Sage.

de Fontenay, E. 1999. *Le Silence Des Bêtes*. Paris: Fayard.

Donaldson, S, and W Kymlicka. 2011. *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gallaher, C. 2009. 'Introduction.' In *Key Concepts in Political Geography*, edited by C Gallaher, C Dahlman, M Gilmartin, A Mountz, and P Shirlow, 1–14. London: Sage.

Ginn, F. 2013. 'Sticky Lives: Slugs, Detachment and More-than-Human Ethics in the Garden.' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. doi:10.1111/tran.12043.

Srinivasan K., (2016) Towards a political animal geography? *Political Geography* (50) 76-78

Greenhough, B. 2010. 'From Ethical Principles to Response-Able Practice.' *Environment and Planning*

*D: Society and Space* 28: 43–45.

Hobson, K. 2007. 'Political Animals? On Animals as Subjects in an Enlarged Political Geography.'

*Political Geography* 26: 250–67.

Holloway, L, C Bear, and K Wilkinson. 2014. 'Re-Capturing Bovine Life: Robot-Cow Relationships,

Freedom and Control in Dairy Farming.' *Journal of Rural Studies* 33: 131–40.

Kallio, K P, and J Häkli. 2010. 'Political Geography in Childhood.' *Political Geography* 29: 357–58.

Lorimer, J. 2007. 'Nonhuman Charisma.' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25: 911–32.

Lorimer, J, and K Srinivasan. 2013. 'Animal Geographies.' In *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to*

*Cultural Geography*, edited by N C Johnson, R Schein, and J Winders, 332–42. Chichester:

John Wiley & Sons.

Mendieta, E. 2011. 'Interspecies Cosmopolitanism: Towards a Discourse Ethics Grounding of Animal

Rights.' *Logos* 10 (1).

Moran, D. 2015. 'Budgie Smuggling or Doing Bird? Human-Animal Interactions in Carceral Space:

Prison(er) Animals as Abject and Subject.' *Social & Cultural Geography* 16 (6): 634–53.

Painter, J, and A Jeffrey. 2009. *Political Geography: An Introduction to Space and Power*. Second.

London: Sage.



Srinivasan K., (2016) Towards a political animal geography? *Political Geography* (50) 76-78

Rasmussen, C E. 2015. 'Pleasure, Pain, and Place: Ag-Gag, Crush Videos, and Animal Bodies on Display.' In *Critical Animal Geographies*, edited by K Gillespie and R Collard, 54–69.

Abingdon: Routledge.

Srinivasan, K. 2013. 'The Biopolitics of Animal Being and Welfare: Dog Control and Care in the UK and India.' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38: 106–19.

doi:10.1111/j.1475-5661.2012.00501.x.

Twine, R. 2010. *Animals as Biotechnology: Ethics, Sustainability and Critical Animal Studies*. London: Earthscan.

Vaughan-Williams, N. 2015. "'We Are Not Animals!'" Humanitarian Border Security and Zoopolitical Spaces in Europe'. *Political Geography* 45: 1–10.

Wolch, J, and J Emel, eds. 1998. *Animal Geographies: Place, Politics and Identity in the Nature-Culture Borderlands*. London: Verso.

Wolfe, C, ed. 2003. *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*. Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press.